WOMEN, WORK, AND FAMILY IN THE 1997 RED RIVER VALLEY FLOOD: TEN LESSONS LEARNED

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Introduction

The experiences of women and men along the Red River of the North varied during the 1997 "flood of the century" just as they did before the disaster.[1] As gender issues in disasters are not well documented in disaster sociology, the focus of this report is on understanding floods through women's eyes. Differences among women naturally made these flood experiences varied as well.[2]

This report emphasizes commonality rather than difference, framing themes as "lessons learned" about issues which can be anticipated when communities are threatened by environmental or technological disasters. How do women's family and work roles engage them in flood preparations and response? What special needs or issues arise for specific groups of women? What resources do they bring to their families and communities during flood recovery? And how can other communities benefit from the experiences of women in this flood?

I spoke with numerous residents of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks, and outlying areas over the course of field visits six, twelve, and eighteen months after the April flood. With the help of knowledgeable community leaders, I interviewed 95 women individually and in focus groups.[3] Among them were disaster outreach workers, single mothers, Fema trailer residents, community activists, artists, seniors, Hispanic and Native American women, educators, home health

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[2] See *The Gendered Terrain of Disaster: Through Women's Eyes* (Greenwood Publications, 1998), edited by Elaine Enarson and Betty Hearn Morrow.

[3] I am very grateful to for help from Tara Mulhauser, UND Children and Family Services Training Center; Cliff Staples, Glinda Crawford, and Kathleen Tiemann , UND Department of Sociology; Kimberly Porter, UND Department of History, Donna Oltmanns, UND Women's Center; Leigh Jeanotte and Bridget Drummer, UND Native American Programs, and those who arranged interviews for this study but cannot be named for reasons of confidentiality. I am especially grateful to those who so generously shared their time and ideas. All statements in italics are direct quotations from taped interviews with respondents. Star symbols separate statements made by different respondents. In addition to primary interview data, the report draws on media accounts, documentary materials provided by flood victims, local research and statistical reports, and oral histories of flood survivors. My thanks to Kimberly Porter, UND Department of History; Elliot Glasheim, North Dakota Museum of Art; and Bob Garrett, UND Chester Fritz Library, Department of Special Collections for their help.

workers, family day care providers, rural women, crisis workers, women in business, and representatives of health and human service agencies. [4] I draw on their experiences and voices to make ten observations about women and the Red River Valley flood and offer a planning checklist for emergency managers and responders at the community level.

Ten Lessons Learned

1. Women were active listeners to emergency communications and sought to prepare their homes, families, and workplaces for the flood.

> *[W]hen we heard that Lincoln dike had broke, we all called my sister to say we'd come over and get trucks and we would move everything out of their home. And [my brother-in-law] just refused. He said "It's not going to flood. We're all right." He just absolutely—and she had a business down in her basement and she wanted to get all that stuff and he just, he refused. . . And I think when it hit, [he] was very closed. You couldn't get him to talk. He would go off and walk by himself a lot, just not talk to anyone and I think he felt really guilty that—"What if I would have done this, we wouldn't have lost all of our furniture, [her] business.*

Women and men in the Red River Valley generally shared the feeling that floodwaters would not reach their homes. When they disagreed, however, women reported taking flood warnings more seriously and making earlier and more extensive preparations, for example considering flood insurance, moving furniture and valuable possessions up to higher ground, packing documents and memorabilia, and making plans for family evacuation. Women's voices were often not heeded in family decisions about flood preparation, however, resulting in avoidable flood damage and increasing family tensions. No information was available to the public addressing this common gender pattern in emergency preparedness.

2. Older, disabled, and low-income women were hard hit by the flood, as were single mothers and women in violent relationships.

> *[Widows] that we got in the hospital and in the nursing home developed problems which they hadn't had before. . . You know, they were able to live alone and manage and so forth, but then when they realized they didn't have a place to live or they lost their house, how were they going to handle this?. . . [A]nd a lot of these people just died, because they could not handle this.*

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[4] Agencies and organizations represented include Disaster Outreach Team, Unmet Needs Committee, Grand Forks Air Force Base Family Support Center, Grand Forks County Social Service Center, Northwest Disaster Response (MN), Northeast Human Service Center (ND), United Way of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks and Area, Lutheran Social Services, Grand Forks Office of the Mayor, P.E.O. and American Association of University Women, Child Care Resource and Referral, Community Violence Intervention Center, East Grand Forks Senior Center, Tri-Valley Opportunity Council, Tri-Valley Migrant Head Start and Day Care, Business and Professional Women, Neighborhood Education Works, Fema, Red River Valley Community Action, North Dakota State University Extension Service, United Home Care, Grand Forks Home Day Care Association, and Red River Valley Habitat for Humanity.

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[T]he lady that's mentally retarded has a really hard time with her family. Her sister found her a place but even as she was giving her the information that she could go into this group home, the mother is yelling in the background, "Don't go there, we have relations and town people will talk."

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Many of our [low-income clients] live in basement-level apartments or garden level, because the rent is a little cheaper. And so many of them found themselves in a situation where they lost probably everything they had. . . It's been real competitive out there for the women, just trying even to get a good job. . . A lot of the women I've worked with have lost employment.

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We have a lot of single mothers out here [in the Fema trailer camp] and a lot of them are strugglin'. . [A single mom with a large family] was given two trailers but she couldn't afford to keep up the heat for both of them.

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"Where do I stay? How do I live, or do I go back to my abuser?" With the lack of a shelter, more women are faced with that decision. . . That still is an issue that's not been resolved.

Flood recovery was more difficult for women who struggled before the flood, whether to escape violence, remain independent, or support their families. Widows, single mothers with large families, isolated rural women in distressed farm families, battered women, women in the 'sandwich generation,' and migrant women were among those identified by service providers as needing more material and emotional support. Homeless, unemployed, and low-income women were less able than more affluent women to evacuate to lake cabins or other second homes, help family members financially, pay post-flood rents, or find work in flood relief projects. The flood-related needs of vulnerable women were not anticipated by emergency planners or directly addressed in relief efforts.

3. Women disproportionately applied for emergency assistance and were primary users of emergency shelter and temporary housing.

I had a hard time going to, like, Red Cross or anything like that. I had a very difficult time. And I don't know if it was a pride thing or what. My Dad would <u>not</u> go. [Your husband?] Oh, there's no way. No. And when we were [evacuated] out there, I <u>had</u> to go. I had nothing for my daughter.

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We had an elderly lady in the [Air Force Base emergency shelter]. . We were trying to figure out what to do with her because the shelter was getting ready to close down, and when it came down to it, she did not want to leave. . . She was the last. We were sweepin' the floors and cleanin' stuff up, and she was sittin' on her

suitcases at the door. . . She had no place to go, because the building that she lived in was not open yet. . . She had boxes of stuff, three or four big cardboard boxes.

Women were overrepresented as users of emergency relief systems, both because they sought help for family members, and because they personally needed temporary housing, financial assistance, transportation, counseling, affordable housing, in-home health care services, violence crisis intervention, and other services. The reluctance of husbands, sons, and fathers to seek needed help—from standing in line for clothing to applying for SBA loans—expanded women's flood recovery work and often increased family tensions and conflict. Flexible work hours helped many women take on these roles, but no consistent provisions were made to support them, for example through on-site, drop-in child care at application centers and distribution points, transportation assistance, or long-term mental health outreach.

4. Evacuation, hosting evacuees, and resettling households challenged women's resources.

My [work] phone would ring from 6 am until ll pm. "What do I do? How do I do it?". . . Plus having people with you and trying to locate people, trying to find people—family, employees--we didn't know where everybody was. . . I never knew when I walked in my door who was coming out of my shower, who was using my laundry, or how many people I was going to feed that night when I came home. I had people in and out. . . [The men] were tired by the time they came back, so I always had the meals ready to go, not knowing what time they were coming—and I never knew when they were going to be there.

Women with family responsibilities evacuated earlier than men and took responsibility for settling children and other family members into uncertain surroundings, often repeatedly. They remained away longer than men, which delayed their return to jobs and school. Women hosting families in outlying areas strove under stressful conditions to create home-like conditions for evacuees, and women evacuees and hosts alike responded as caregivers to births, deaths, and other life events occurring at the height of the crisis. Employed women especially struggled to meet the needs of those at home and work, often under extraordinarily difficult conditions. Evacuation and relocation were a source of unexpected pleasure for some, but also help explain the high levels of stress reported by many women interviewed in this study. No support systems were in place for women hosts and evacuees sustaining dislocated families.

5. Child care and other family services were essential to household and business recovery.

We had about 5,000 licensed child care slots that were all shut down in the course of one day. . . But it really opened their eyes! It took 53 feet of water for them to realize—oh, family child care is an issue. And then we were getting calls from the business community. "Well, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to fix it?"

The flood highlighted the unacknowledged role of child care in community life. Child care centers and home providers closed when the city evacuated, and many remained closed when residents returned to clean and begin repairing damaged homes and workplaces. When floodwaters damaged basement space, supplies, and equipment used for child care, many family day care providers did not reopen. Private businesses and public agencies struggled to provide returning residents with vital services because they depended on female labor and child care providers. In some cases, lack of child care delayed women's return to emergency response jobs and service agencies assisting flood victims. The vulnerability of foster parenting, home health care for the seriously ill and disabled, and other community-based family services was equally evident. Disruptions in these informal family support systems were not anticipated by emergency planners or employers.

6. Women were at increased risk of violence after the flood.

> *I've had a lot of clients that didn't necessarily go back to their abusers but they still need to rely on them for—whether fixing up their house, or financial resources that maybe they wouldn't have needed before. . . [The lack of a shelter] really compromises the security and the safety element for women. . . [A]busers aren't stupid, by any means. . . It's very easy to track somebody down, and that doesn't provide the kind of security and safety that we want to be able to provide.*

Domestic violence also became more visible after the flood when violence against women increased. Protection orders obtained by women, for example, increased by 65% in the first quarter of 1998 over the corresponding period before the 1997 flood. Counseling calls to the crisis center were 59% higher in July, 1997 than in July, 1996. Relocated from their flooded office to a series of temporary locations, the Grand Forks crisis center was harder for clients to find, had less space for support groups and private counseling, and lost their emergency shelter. Flood relief monies helped the agency rebuild, but the life safety of women endangered by the flood was not identified as a priority in emergency planning.

7. Racial divisions among women along the Red River Valley were exacerbated by the flood.

> *There were big signs in the door saying 'We're helping Minnesota families that went through the flood.". . . It's assumed because you're brown, you're migrants. . . . Well, they were giving away groceries and anything you needed in the house. So we went and they wouldn't even let us in the door. The man who was there at the door took one look and he says, "You don't belong here. Get out of here." We've been here 34 years. . . My husband just came out of the hospital last Monday. . . and we really need some help. He won't go. We'll never go to the Salvation Army.*

Most flood victims in the Red River Valley shared a Northern European heritage, but Native American and Hispanic families also had long roots in the area. Reflecting misconceptions about

skin color and residence status, volunteers in some disaster relief projects restricted aid to non-Hispanic residents. Migrant families vital to the agricultural economy lost access to low-cost housing and other needed supplies, but were offered little recovery assistance. A number of Hispanic women in East Grand Forks experienced subtle and overt racial bias in flood relief projects. This pattern was not reported by Native American women, many of whom evacuated to nearby reservations where both family support and government flood relief were available. Relief agencies did not monitor their practices and procedures to guard against racial discrimination when women sought help for their families.

8. Women's workplaces and home-based businesses were heavily impacted.

> *I helped my sister move some things out early. She was doing day care and we had to wait for those children's mother to get home. She was evacuating people from El Monte Nursing Home.*
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> *I do a lot of business with the consultants that have come in! And so it has been a really big boost for me in the business.*
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> *I'm working in this office that also was affected, [where the] main floor had sewage and back-up. They're dealing with that so I'm not having to, but I'm relocating, resetting up an office of clients and absorbing existing clients. . . And finding contractors. . . I don't have any time. I can't capture enough time to get the work done at my office or at the house. And my son got engaged at Christmas. We have to get the basement ready for relatives.*

Work hours and income increased after the flood for some women, and college-educated women predominated among those employed in new flood recovery projects. But the flood put other women out of work in such home-based businesses as family day care, crafts, bookkeeping, and hairdressing. Some older women were forced into early retirement while others had to delay retirement to meet new flood expenses. Women's concentration in service occupations and health and education professions brought them stressful work as informal disaster responders, for example evacuating patients, counseling and nursing victims, processing insurance claims, and teaching. Work and family conflicts increased and some mothers felt their children paid the price. Gender patterns in the economic impacts of the flood were not monitored nor were women-owned businesses and home-based work specifically included in business recovery initiatives.

9. Strong organizational and personal networks helped women through the flood.

> *Where we live, I have a neighbor who is now 90 years old, and she's just like a mother. I can go over there any time and have coffee with her and visit. . . So I mean, there was people that, whenever I'd get mad or something, I had one or the other to go and visit.. They would talk to me and I would feel better afterwards.*
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At work we have a good balance of men and women. And the men focused on the building and the structure. . . And our conversation, when women got together, was the feelings parts of things and the stress, and 'Oh, I know Benny at SBA, too!" The people, the people behind it.

Women along the Red River Valley found humor and unexpected rewards in the flood but also described physical stress symptoms, speaking often of weariness, uncertainty, and increased conflict in family relationships. Their caregiving responsibilities expanded as they responded to husbands, children, and parents deeply affected by the flood. Often, they reported that friendships with other women sustained them, especially among single women, seniors, and women in the Hispanic community. Women's service and professional organizations across the nation assisted local groups or chapters, providing emotional as well as material support (e.g. money, letters, quilting fabric, care packages, Christmas ornaments). These resources were not identified as community assets during the recovery period.

l0. Women demonstrated leade rship during the flood in their homes, workplaces, and community.

In two hours we had our little [clothes distribution] shop open. . .. And I said to our volunteers, "Find the clothing for them. But at the same time, don't just think of that task. Listen to the stories, because they need to talk." . . . I had worked at the Emergency Operation Center, and I had worked with the Red Cross providing meals for the dikers and sandbaggers prior to opening the distribution center. And then I thought, and two others of us working there said, "We've got to find some ways to do some mental health stuff with the people. So I called the State Department of Mental Health and said, "What's being done? What can we do?"

Many women were among the elected officials responding to the flood, and Grand Forks Mayor Pat Owens drew national attention for her focus on the human side of the flood. Many other women were front-line emergency responders, organized emergency relief centers, designed creative outreach programs, managed direct-service organizations assisting flood victims, and helped recommend flood mitigation and reconstruction directions. Rural women played especially large roles in community flood relief. In addition to hosting families, they organized community-based child care, clothing, food, laundry, and other services for evacuees and emergency responders. Women actively worked "on stage" and off, sandbagging and cooking for sandbaggers, volunteering in emergency relief centers and caring for children so others could. They organized parents to defend the rebuilding of neighborhood schools, started support groups for flood victims in churches and schools, kept flood journals with children, and recorded family flood stories. Women across the Valley also organized art shows, musicals, children's murals, and other community celebrations increasing community solidarity and long-term recovery. Yet the media more often depicted women as victims than as active responders, and their initiative and informal leadership remained unrecognized.

Gender Issues in Community Disaster Planning

What practical implications follow from these experiences and observations? The following guidelines are based on these findings and may help prepare emergency management authorities, social service organizations, schools, employers, disaster relief agencies, counselors, and elected officials in the Red River Valley better anticipate and meet the needs of women in the next "flood of the century."

Ten Planning Questions for Community Disaster Planners

___Do your emergency warnings specifically target men who may be reluctant to prepare for disasters? Are women's networks utilized to reach families with information about household preparedness, clean up and repair?

___Do you know which women in your area are most likely to need assistance before, during, and after the emergency? Which women will need what kinds of long-term assistance?

___Have you budgeted for on-site child care and other services improving women's access to your resources after a disaster? Do your mental health programs and publications target women caregivers, and men unable to ask for help?

___ Do your mental health programs and publications identify gender-specific sources of stress specifically arising for women? Can you support women who host evacuees and those who head evacuated households?

___Have you analyzed the vulnerabilities and capacities of local child care and family support systems in the event of a disaster? Do you target child care centers and family day homes in emergency preparedness initiatives?

___Are funding provisions in place to help local crisis centers respond to increased violence against women? Have shelters been identified as critical care facilities? Are women's antiviolence organizations included in community emergency plan exercises?

___Is antiracist training provided to those in emergency relief roles? Have you assessed the race-specific impacts of your emergency response procedures and policies? Do your staff and volunteers reflect the diversity of your community?

___Are gender-specific data available on women's economic status in your community? Can you monitor the economic impacts of disasters on women employees, business-owners, farmers, and homemakers? Do women's primary employers have disaster plans in place supporting the work and family roles of employees in emergencies?

___Are women's organizations in your area networked with direct-service agencies serving other vulnerable populations? Is emergency preparedness on their agenda?

___Are women integrated into all levels of emergency management in your community? Have you educated local media about the complex roles women take on in disasters?